

Distant Horizons

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Summary

(2240) - Two months in, Scotty starts figuring out a few things. Like what freedom is, when you've earned it rather than gained it by apathy.

(And maybe how to start being defiant against the impossible again, too.)

It struck him as somehow ironic that he could look at a piece of equipment and often figure out how it worked within a matter of minutes, but it still took him over two months to actually figure out that the purpose of Basic Training's Phase One was conditioning. And not just physical conditioning.

Scotty wasn't a big fan of jogging; before signing with Starfleet, he'd never really engaged in it for the purpose of exercise. It wasn't that he didn't jog ever, but it was always with a firm destination in mind. The physical training in Basic was pretty rigorous, but at least when it came to the endurance aspects, he had an easy time of it; in Aberdeen, walking had been his primary mode of transportation, seconded by the public transit. So, despite it being a work-out for him, he wasn't dropping in a heap when it was over like some of the others.

He still wasn't a fan of jogging as exercise, but he was becoming a very big fan of the results this particular morning, anyway.

The grass bowing into the path tickled his legs, intermittently making him feel like he'd picked up an insect; still, after checking a few times in a bout of paranoia and finding it was only the grass catching against him, he managed to tune it out. But despite the workout he was giving himself, the Marin Valley was cool in the early August light, the air off of the Pacific keeping it such. Depending on where he was on the trail he could catch glimpses of the ocean out there, spread to the horizon, though he had yet to get to the edge of it, taking something of a meandering path, lost in the beauty of the terrain and the *freedom* of being alone for the first time in two months.

The low golden morning sun at his back was shining on the last of the mist, burning it off. The black-tailed deer dotted the hillsides and picked their heads up to look at him with dew dark on their muzzles, but seemed mostly unafraid.

Being by himself felt strange, absent wildlife. Something almost euphoric. Something almost unsettled. Neither quite rising to the whole of their proper definitions, though.

Scotty had been jogging since before it was even light out; he'd woken up in the dark barracks and saw he was one of maybe three people who wanted to take advantage of their first taste of freedom in months; everyone else was asleep still, in their bunks. If not for the itch to *move* in his veins, he might have even slept in himself, but instead woke easily and quickly to his PADD's alarm buzzing under his pillow and was out the door not even fifteen minutes after, taking only his Starfleet ID with him.

Rios had grown up in this area and had pointed him in this direction when he mentioned offhandedly wanting to use their first day off to explore the area; she'd also had a suggestion or two about where he should stop for breakfast. Scotty took both and made an internal note to tell her that they were dead on; while it had only been a partial truth that he wanted to explore, it was still a truth nonetheless.

Explaining to them that the rest of it was trying to measure *himself* after two months as a Starfleet recruit would have required words he couldn't have put together even if he were inclined.

It was when Scotty had realized that he really wanted to put some distance between himself and the Academy, that he wanted space to take stock of himself, that he had also realized the past two months of Basic had been all about conditioning. Not because he had suddenly turned into someone who exercised for fun, but because when he was actually *given* some solitude and freedom, he felt the overpowering urge to take it and run with it for awhile.

Now out with his running shoes making a steady beat on the hard-packed ground, he had room enough to chew over how he wasn't the same

as he'd been during intake, let alone before. That after some initial struggling, he'd managed to fall into step with his squad; that after that early resistance, having no frame of reference for relying on anyone beyond himself, the predictable and consistent consequences of his choices offered the strangest kind of *comfort*.

He didn't have to guess at what might happen, at least so far as that. If he broke the rules, he was reprimanded. If he tried to power through an injury without telling Eissa, he'd be hauled to the infirmary and have to stand witness while Eissa took the heat as Scotty's squad leader.

If he wanted this freedom, this single day out of the Earth standard week where he could pull on running shoes and put some distance between himself and Starfleet's training grounds, he had orders to follow and duties to fulfill and watches to keep and marches to complete and firing range practice and--

And there was the conditioning part of it.

He finally slowed down to a walk at the banked and carved stairs down the hillside towards the crescent of beach below. It was deserted for the moment, though he'd seen other people in the park and knew it probably wouldn't stay that way. His heart was beating harder for the workout, he could feel a bit of burn in his legs, but it wasn't real fatigue. Especially after the past two months.

It had been all about the conditioning, so far. By the end of his first week in Basic, he couldn't care less how packed the barracks were -- he was so tired at night that he'd drop like a rock into his bunk and hit terminal oblivion, sometimes before he even had a chance to get all that comfortable. It had been one of the things that worried him most, trying to just *sleep* around other people when he had a hard enough time of it in his own bed, but it turned out that there was such a thing as getting physically leveled to the point where dropping at the end felt like a reward instead of a trial or torment.

After that, he'd learned to sleep through all kinds of people-driven noise, either talking or snoring or what-have-you, mostly because he was just too tired *not* to. He still startled and often pulled back a fist when woken by someone touching him, but incredibly, his squadmates didn't ask him what kind of lunatic he was.

(Scotty didn't so much know what to make of Eissa's thoughtful look when that happened, but the squad leader didn't push on it, either.)

It wasn't that he'd decided to like being in a crowd, but when his day consisted of getting up, squaring away the barracks, doing PT, getting a shower, having breakfast -- including the mandated extra protein and calories to build him up some -- then various classes, lunch, drill and ceremony, more classes, dinner, more classes, more PT, another shower, bed, he quickly and genuinely stopped giving a damn about how many people were around him.

He had to absorb and become proficient at so many things in those first weeks that there were times when he was just surviving it in ten minute blocks. There sure hadn't been time to actually talk himself into any kind of self-doubt.

The path had gotten a bit narrower as he was lost in his thoughts, having gotten to the bottom of the hill. This particular path would end on the crescent beach he'd spied before from a higher elevation; months in San Francisco and spitting distance from the Pacific Ocean, and he hadn't been to that shore, only making it so far as the borders of the Bay.

It was while he was thinking over conditioning that he looped back to his own realizations: He'd figured out, only recently, that he had the potential to be a worryingly good soldier. Maybe *too* good, for that matter. While Starfleet's drill instructors weren't nearly so harsh as military drill instructors were said to be in the past, Scotty still reacted instantly to the hard tones they used, and followed orders in that same instant just so that they wouldn't go barking at him.

(Just so that he wouldn't find out what worse could happen if he failed, whatever logic said.)

But so far, it had certainly worked out for him; while he wasn't the shining star of this intake group, he wasn't reprimanded once yet for acting too slowly or hesitating, either.

Logically, he knew that the ability to follow orders swiftly was pretty important, especially in a crisis situation. There was a reason that Basic started with drilling and ceremony and repetition and strict routines -- while Starfleet didn't want robots or people who couldn't do their own thinking, allegedly, they needed people who could follow the chain of command. Later, they would supposedly learn to think more independently; for now, they were expected to jump when told and not quibble.

But it turned out that Scotty was a worryingly good soldier, and a fairly good marksman, too. Above average with a phaser rifle, and not shabby with a hand phaser. It had kind of hit him, while he was taking out the targets with relative ease, that he could someday have to do this with *living beings*. And that was where the 'too good' part came in.

Despite reacting instantly to orders, including orders to fire on targets that were a wee bit too humanoid, he held some part of himself in reserve that refused to like it, or seek approval for it, or want it.

Engineering didn't often require that sort of thing.

Command School, on the other hand--

He'd dutifully filed the application a few days ago, and hoped desperately in the back of his mind that it would be rejected. He'd filed it because his Mum had wanted him to, because he had said he would; there had been a long moment, though, staring at the papers that he had nearly decided not to.

Where something tickled in the back of his mind that said this was his life, his decision, for good or ill or nothing at all.

But even after two months away, his life still bent to hers, as it always had; he sighed out quietly and then signed the application with a resigned heart.

Now, he took his freedom, freedom he'd genuinely earned maybe for the first time in his life, and ran. Not away, but maybe *to*. And maybe in some silent hope that if he ran far enough, he would know how to change things. How to buck off the expectations, to get away from the disapproval enough that he was no longer willing to do anything to avoid it.

To recognize conditioning for what it was and then how to decide what to do about it, either here or there.

For now, though, Scotty only stopped walking when he saw what felt like a glance at the end of all things.

Not the San Francisco Bay. Not the North Sea. Not the Atlantic. But the Pacific proper; it was an incredible blue he'd never seen before, broken only by the whitecaps rolling in. The water gathered itself up and then threw itself ashore, thundering against the rock formations on either side of the secluded little beach at the end of the trail, each rolling wave shaking itself to pieces in a white spray as it chased itself ashore over and over.

That much eternity demanded reverence. Something too big for humans to take on without the aid of mechanics; something one person could never hope to conquer without some artificial help. It demanded a quiet and reflective respect, that vast and unfathomable amount of water.

Scotty stood for long moments, breath falling automatically in line with the boom of the waves, goosebumps racing across his skin both for the sharp edge of the air so close to the water and for the *scope* of the ocean in front of him.

The impossible. The glimpse of what the very end of all things might look like.

The reminder of his size against it, too.

That much eternity demanded reverence, but then, feeling fierce, he answered it with defiance.

Without a thought about the cold water, the wild waves, the long trip back to the barracks, his shoes or anything else at all, he ran headlong into the end of the world.

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